

<b>Institution:</b> University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 23 (Education)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Ways of Knowing: Cross-cultural collaborative educational research in the development and implementation of pedagogic practice and policy at the Royal University of Bhutan as the national provider of higher education in a Least Developed Country		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> April 2005 to December 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Frank Rennie	Professor of Sustainable Rural Development, and Head of Research and Postgraduate Development at Lews Castle College UHI	September 1993 to present
Keith Smyth	Professor of Pedagogy, Head of Learning and Teaching Academy, UHI	July 2014 to present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> August 2013 to December 2020 (ongoing)		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)  The Royal University of Bhutan, (RUB) was founded in 2003, bringing together geographically distributed colleges and directly responsible to the Government Dept of Education as the only university in Bhutan. Since 2005 UHI has led research and development to adapt best educational practices in an appropriate cultural context, working with a wide diversity of staff at RUB to establish effective policies and practices for the new university. This case study looks at the impact from 2013 to present. Seven clear impacts are the (1) embedding of academic development regulations, (2) the QA system, (3) validation procedures, (4) flexible course design, (5) mentoring of academic staff, (6) engagement in pedagogic research, and (7) frameworks for professional accreditation.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)  The current CHORTENS project (Creating Helpful Open Research Tools for Engaging New Staff) runs from 2019 to 2021 focused specifically on enhancing the scholarship of young staff, early career researchers, and women academics. Research aims include the preparation of an action plan for the guidance of the development research activities in universities in other Less-Developed Countries, and also the establishment and monitoring of an institutional fellowship scheme for RUB focused on internal accreditation of educational practice and strategic capacity for research, from which future academic activity in pedagogical research can be supported and coordinated. These outcomes are explored in our paper on cross-cultural action research (3.1). This paper includes what appears to be the first published phenomenographic investigation into academics' perspectives on the nature, challenges and enablers of developing educational research capacity and culture in a new university in a developing country.</p> <p>A strong collaborative relationship between RUB and UHI was first established when a delegation from RUB visited Scotland in 2004, a year after becoming established as the first university in Bhutan. The RUB has a federated collegial model, geographically distributed in a similar manner to UHI. Key differences are in the paucity of digital networks, very limited resource funding, and a smaller student body with which to develop the academic skills base. In 2013 the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences was established as the second university in Bhutan. Since 2017 their staff have participated in the UHI-RUB programmes.</p> <p>Seeking to build upon these similarities to foster collaboration and research in areas of shared interest, Professor Rennie undertook his first visit to Bhutan in 2005. The purpose of this visit</p>		

was to investigate the educational and cultural contexts within which RUB was developing, and to identify and implement evidence-based responses. From the start, an action research methodology was adopted, exploring the educational context, identifying areas for enhancement, and evaluating interventions through liaison with the Office of the Vice-Chancellor. This has enabled many staff through RUB to engage with research practice for the first time, and this capacity-building is documented in our 2020 paper (3.1)

The unique position of the RUB means that within the country, there is no comparator to benchmark quality standards or practice. Therefore, a key element of the UHI partnership has been to understand and analyse key aspects of the educational and wider culture, and to initiate responses, interventions and scholarship in order to enhance teaching and research. Customised workshops arising from this action research have included capacity-building in course design (including online modules), assessment construction, and exploring the potential of digital resources for learning and teaching in Bhutan. Mentoring staff in online delivery has been developed as a crucial resource and has grown in importance due to COVID19 constraints. Key outputs from the initial research include a book publication on academic practice in Bhutan (3.2), and journal papers on networked learning and teaching in Bhutan and other geographically dispersed contexts in developing regions (3.3, 3.4). Two co-authored books based on educational research undertaken with RUB, and disseminating the findings of jointly scoped educational research undertaken within RUB, have been published (3.2, 3.5).

Research activity from 2017 saw Rennie and colleagues investigate the creation of an appropriate Learning and Teaching Strategy and associated opportunities for the professional accreditation of academic staff within RUB. Mentoring and support by UHI staff, based on this strategy, was used to develop a professional development framework to enable RUB staff to achieve recognition against benchmarked standards (from the UK Higher Education Academy) of professional academic competence. This involved knowledge exchange and action research based on UHI's experiences in developing and implementing a framework of accredited learning.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1 Smyth, K., Rennie, F., Davies, G. and Tobgay, S (2020) Transnational collaboration in building educational research capacity in a new university: an applied phenomenographic investigation. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 8 (2) pp 39-49  
<https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v8i2.460>

3.2 Rennie, F. and Mason, R. (Eds.) (2008) *Bhutan: Ways of knowing*. Information Age Publishing: Charlotte, N.C. (Note: Google books preview available at <https://tinyurl.com/y5e2n3sq>)

3.3 Rennie, F. and Mason, R. (2008) Flexibility and Distributed Education. *The Nepalese Journal of Development and Rural Studies* 5 (2) pp 13-17

3.4 Rennie, F. and Mason, R. (2007) The development of distributed learning techniques in Bhutan and Nepal. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 8 (1)  
 URL: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/339/765>

3.5 Rennie, F. (Ed.) *Bhutan: Ways of learning and teaching*. eTIPS/University of the Highlands and Islands/Royal University of Bhutan.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

RUB is a federal University that covers the whole of Bhutan, which is a small kingdom situated in the Himalayas between India and China. Bhutan is about the size of Switzerland with a population of around 800 thousand. Literacy is low, although improving rapidly, and although education is free, progress to Higher Education is relatively new and limited. UN indicators show that it is one of the least developed countries in the world, although the country is keen to develop and exploit suitable ways to grow its links and connectivity to other areas of the world. Higher Education is a key tool for this engagement, through RUB provisions to help train and develop individuals in order for the country to secure economic and social development as a

whole. It has therefore been critical to establish a solid foundation for engagement with the leaders of both the Bhutanese government, particularly the Education Ministry, and the academic leadership of the RUB, which is the main (official) provider of Higher Education in the country, in order to be entrusted to help RUB and the country achieve the broad-based development it seeks, founded on a revised approach to engagement of academic staff, administrative staff, and students, with Higher Education.

Since 2005 Professor Rennie has purposefully built a range of personal and education-based links, trust and respect, in order to be able to work closely with HE leaders and staff in RUB and the Education Ministry. In doing so, his research and engagement has helped steer and lead the development of RUB's entire academic structure, and to bring its educational provisions and standards into broad-based alignment with international standards, while at the same time maintaining the appropriate integrity, culture and context within its Bhutanese setting. His approach has been to work 'with' and not superimpose 'on' the existing people and structures and thereby to build a truly effective and embedded new system of HE provision across the whole of Bhutan, and this has required a fully research-based underpinning (3.1).

Initial work undertaken by Rennie and colleagues to support engagement in educational scholarship and research with RUB, included workshops dedicated to RUB staff (200+ RUB staff in 2005, 2008, 2017-2020) designing and conducting educational research and writing peer-reviewed publications. This led directly to a small number of staff producing a peer-reviewed book during the early stages of the period of impact, (Bhutan: Ways of knowing, 3.2). In the past 4 years the work has been further extended and now includes a team of academic and professional services colleagues from the UHI (including Smyth) who are all taking a pivotal role in helping shape what is fast becoming a model of educational development, practice and activity in a hitherto largely inaccessible part of the world.

Evidence of the success of the approach taken across our longitudinal programme of collaborative research is the growth of scholarly outputs from Bhutanese academics, that are now being received and cited in international HE contexts (3.2, 3.5, and statement of impact from Director Yangka 5.1). These include recommendations for similar cross-cultural cross-institutional educational research and development initiatives with newly-established universities in Least-Developed Countries. RUB has developed its quality assurance procedures and the validation process for new academic awards as a direct result of UHI/RUB collaborative action research projects and interventions, resulting in the development of the now expansive RUB higher education curricula (statement of impact from Karma Tshering, Registrar of RUB, 5.2). Other key components of RUB policy and regulations developed through our collaborative research and related strategic activities include RUB's Wheel of Academic Law (supporting impact statement from Dr. Cheki Dorji, President of the College of Science and Technology, 5.3) and Strategic Development Plans (5.4) for academic and professional growth (5.1, 5.2, 5.6).

In 2020, as a result of collaborations to date, RUB and UHI signed a Memorandum of Understanding (5.5) to formalise their relationship and to provide the foundation for continued partnership working and collaborative research in educational practice and policy.

In specific terms, during the period covered by the current REF period, the programme of research and development between the RUB and UHI has had seven major impacts (see range of testimonials outlined in Section 5, also referenced below) that have strengthened the RUB.

First: the development of a Bhutan-wide HE growth and development policy informing the learning and teaching strategy, (based on 'The Wheel of Academic Law') which has been put into effect and is affecting all aspects of HE delivery across the provisions of the RUB, thereby affecting 1174 staff members and over 10,100 students. The Wheel of Academic Law is the regulatory framework for RUB developed through a very early engagement with UHI (5.3).

Second: the establishment and delivery of a comprehensive programme and process of Quality Assurance policies and regulations, which now govern the entirety of the educational provision

of the RUB and operate at international-level academic standards (5.1, 5.2). This has enabled a rigorous and consistent approach to academic development and has allowed RUB to compare itself with international academic standards and to operate at those standards. The QA approach affects the daily lives and activity of all the staff who work in its 14 campuses and its students.

Third: the introduction of formal validation processes and procedures for the quality assurance of curriculum and academic awards were jointly-developed, which are now comprehensively embedded throughout RUB (more than 100+ programmes validated through this process) (5.2). This has enabled a formal approach to evaluation of the quality of the curriculum and has acted as a baseline for further developments, particularly for course design and student-led engagement initiatives. Supporting testimonials collected from both major stakeholders (5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.6) and participants (5.7) attest to a range of high-value impacts relating to the enhancement of learning, teaching, and research across the range of discipline areas taught within RUB. Related knowledge exchange outputs in form of case studies, academic posters, and good practice exemplars were produced for wider dissemination across RUB. Engaging in these scholarly activities were new ground for the majority of RUB academic staff (5.1).

Fourth: Increased course flexibility has encouraged an increase in student numbers attending courses across the campuses that comprise RUB, and this has included opening opportunities that did not formerly exist for people from the poorest and more remote backgrounds to engage in HE. This educational provision has itself then acted to facilitate enhancements in economic activity, agricultural efficiency, forestry, environment, local business development and engagement, computerised infrastructure developments (based on the connectivity necessary for the running of educational programmes in largely remote and rural contexts), thereby improving living standards for the population, 58% of whom were rural in 2010 (World Bank).

Fifth: the recent development, as part of the UHI/RUB link, of a comprehensive scheme for mentoring and supervision of staff, especially in respect of 'action research' into 'educational practice' (both individual and institutional). This has been facilitated by the development and launch of the Centre for University Learning and Teaching (CULT) at RUB, which has been based on the Learning and Teaching Academy development in UHI, which was itself the result of research-based assessment of educational development needs at UHI c. 10 years ago (see UoA 23 Environment Statement). CULT is located in the Office of the Vice-Chancellor of RUB, which (in the Bhutanese HE context) demonstrates the highest level of priority for its 'place' in the development work that is underway, in order to deliver a staged and coordinated process to provide remote mentoring support for RUB staff in various aspects of educational practice (5.6).

The CHORTENS project has extended the mentoring practice and provision UHI and RUB have already established through CULT, with a key outcome being the founding of online mentoring arrangements between UHI and RUB to support staff engagement in writing for publication in learning and teaching, to support professional recognition of practice, and to meet a specific need in supporting the development of early career female academics at RUB. These mentoring arrangements have been formalised in a collaborative agreement (5.8) and their initiation and impact to date are the focus of the chapter by Walker (in 3.5) and impact statement 5.2.

Sixth: Engagement in educational research was consolidated and extended during the current phase. Rennie and Smyth returned to Bhutan in 2017, 2019 and 2020 to work with RUB to (a) establish a baseline study of the conceptual and practical engagement of staff at RUB with the issues of pedagogical research on their own practices; (b) intervene with appropriate capacity-building support structures and activities; and (c) analyse RUB staff experiences and their impact on the institutional development, practice and policies (5.9). A key outcome of this phase was nine educational action research projects, focused on different learning and teaching challenges or issues across all nine of the colleges that comprise RUB (published in 3.5).

Seventh: In the most recent past, the exploration of appropriate techniques to design and deliver online education have been instrumental in enabling staff to respond to the COVID19 lockdown in Bhutan. The combination of the work of CULT and the framework for the accreditation of

professional standards are seen as critical to both the improvement of student performance outcomes and the engagement of academic staff in research and reflection on their own practices. These and other related developments and impacts are articulated more fully in our published outputs. UHI is currently responding to a request from the RUB for collaboration in the move from face-to-face to online education as a result of the pandemic and an analysis of this will form a key strand in the next phase of the action research.

In late 2020 a co-authored e-book titled 'Bhutan: Ways of learning and teaching' (3.5 and also presented as corroborating source for impact 5.10) was published, as a complement and update to an earlier book on 'Bhutan: Ways of knowing' (3.2). The new book carries several chapters from RUB colleagues who were supported to develop their educational research practice through the CHORTENS project, and for each of these colleagues is their first formal educational research publication (5.1, 3.1). The book also documents the ethos, rationale for and approach taken within the learning and teaching and educational research capacity building activities of the CHORTENS collaboration as the latest and current UHI/RUB initiative.

The relationship with the RUB and the Bhutanese Ministry of Education continues to develop and grow even beyond the significant achievements noted above, and are also leading to the establishment of a pilot activity for the professional accreditation of academic staff. This work is ongoing but has already generated considerable discussion within the RUB.

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 Impact testimonial. Director Yangka, Office of the Vice Chancellor.

5.2 Impact testimonial. Karma Tshering, Registrar of the RUB, Office of the Vice Chancellor.

5.3 Impact testimonial. Dr Cheki Dorji, President, College of Science and Technology, RUB.

5.4 RUB Strategic Plan 2018-2030.

5.5 Memorandum of Understanding between RUB and UHI signed in 2019

5.6 Impact testimonial. Dr Sonam Tobgay, Head, Centre for University Learning and Teaching, Office of the Vice Chancellor.

5.7 Academic practitioner testimonials pertaining to engagement in CHORTENS workshops.

5.8 Official agreement to develop a mentoring programme between the UHI and the RUB.

5.9 CHORTENS Annual Project Report 2018/19.

5.10 Rennie, F. (Ed.) Bhutan: Ways of learning and teaching. eTIPS/University of the Highlands and Islands/Royal University of Bhutan. This multi-authored book is a collection of chapters detailing the action research projects initiated as a result of the CHORTENS project during 2019-2020, and detailing the work of the UHI and RUB to date.